

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION POLITICS: THE CASE OF DISABLED CHILDREN

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Abstract – *This paper explores Greek-Cypriot parents' role in influencing developments regarding the education of disabled children in Cyprus. It mainly comments upon parents' conceptualisations of disabled children's rights which guided their responses to educational, social and political issues related to disability. The historical and interpretative nature of this paper is achieved by building arguments through interpreting qualitative data covering the period 1970-2007. Four periods associated with important developments were identified to facilitate understanding of parental involvement in politics: (i) early forms of parental mobilisation; (ii) parent groups acting as 'non-pressure' groups; (iii) parental power through networking; and (iv) resolving issues of identity and power between parent pressure groups. The paper ends with a critical discussion of parental involvement in education politics in relation to the nature of parent associations which constitute this evolving pressure group.*

Introduction

In the light of an increasing appreciation of parental involvement regarding disability related educational issues (Riddell, Brown & Duffield, 1994; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997), parents' role in the developing legislative context of inclusive education is now of interest (Tisdall & Riddell, 2006). In the context of inclusion, the medical and normalising assumptions embedded in segregation and integration are marginalised, theoretically leaving the 'experts' with less power to determine disabled children's future. Many definitions of inclusive education have been advanced, but what actually differentiates integration from inclusion is that inclusion is about the right of all children to full, and not partial, participation in education (Florian, 1998). Parallel to inclusive education theories, theories in disability studies emphasised the social aspects of disability (Oliver, 1990), while the psycho-emotional dimension of impairment (Thomas, 1999) and the impact of history, culture and language to the experience of disability (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002) were also recognised. Within this rich theoretical context, parents' role in shaping their disabled children's every-day lives and influencing developments at political level can be conceptualised through different angles. As far as the education of disabled children is concerned, parents are now expected

to be among the protagonists of the road to inclusion. Their role is not merely restricted to supporting the education of their children. They are now expected to be alert to on-going developments regarding education in order to safeguard fundamental rights and place prospective political changes in the appropriate philosophical and theoretical contexts.

Parents' involvement in educational developments is actually one type of parental advocacy. Prior to reaching this level of involvement, parents exert influence through the level of economic and practical support they are able to offer, as well as through the socialisation in which families are engaged (Dee, 2006). Parental involvement in educational provision is another important type of parental advocacy. Lewis (1993) informs us that in the UK, parents have the right to influence decisions in four aspects of educational provision: (i) formal educational assessment; (ii) appeals; (iii) non-statemented special provision; and (iv) participation or otherwise in the curriculum. Parental involvement can be quite powerful when it comes to decision-making about young people's choices in further education and employment. In many cases, particularly in cases of young people with learning difficulties, parental choices may supersede their children's views (Dee, 2006) or be influenced by professionals' choices (Broomhead, 1998). However, research evidence suggests that parents' role in influencing young people's decisions is significant not only in cases of young disabled people, but also in cases of young non-disabled people (Ball, Maguire & Macrae, 2000; cited in Dee, 2006). Often, parental involvement goes beyond family and school level, and reaches the political sphere. Organised parents, who are accorded the role of advocates, aim to influence political developments to improve the quality of life of their children.

In this context, the extent to which parents should be able to define their children's personal and social lives in the future is an issue. In an imaginary decision-making continuum, where do parents' and children's views meet? Lewis (1993) provides relevant examples to suggest that parents and children may disagree about the nature of children's 'best interests' because they hold different priorities. Parents are expected to safeguard their children's rights while, at the same time, they should appreciate their children's views and their role in decision-making. A fundamental question would be: Are parents adequately equipped to acknowledge their delicate role as advocates and to participate in a continuous struggle for change as equal partners to other stakeholders, such as politicians, ministry officers, teachers and experts? A brief account of parental involvement in educational developments so far can help shape a preliminary answer to the question posed here.

In Cyprus, parents (of disabled and non-disabled children) have a relatively short history of substantial involvement in educational developments. The social,

political and historical context of Cyprus explains their belated engagement in lobbying the state for educational improvement. The Cypriot family has undergone a structural shift which followed the country's shift in politics and economy, and has had an impact on the perceived role of education (Symeonidou, 2005). Cyprus' unsteady political past (Turkish occupation from 1571 to 1878 and British colonialism from 1878 to 1960) justifies the Greek-Cypriots' strong bonds with the Orthodox Christian Church (Phtiaka, 2003) that was seen as the medium toward national, cultural and linguistic survival. Before Cyprus became an independent republic in 1960, a standard family would have many members. People would earn their living through cultivation and farming. As children helped their parents in the fields, schooling was a secondary activity. Most children left primary school before they reached the last grade, as a result of their parents' instigations. Those who managed to graduate from high school were a minority. Young adults, usually males, who managed to get university education, mostly in Greece, were even fewer (Argyrou, 1996). After Cyprus gained independence, and especially after the 1974 invasion, Cyprus' economy changed. The loss of agricultural land favoured light industry and services. Families became smaller: a standard family would have two children. Medium and high socio-economic class parents increasingly value education, as they see it as a means toward well-paid, respectful employment. Nowadays, almost all children graduate from high school and more and more youngsters pursue academic studies either in the University of Cyprus or in other universities, preferably in Greece, the UK and the USA.

Considering the particularities of the Cypriot context, parental involvement in educational issues emerged in co-operation with teachers, a highly respected group of professionals at the time. Polydourou (1995; cited in Phtiaka, 1999) informs us that between the late 1940s and 1950s, Parent-Teacher Associations flourished in Cyprus, having as a main goal the provision of free milk, food and clothes to poor children. Later, parents functioned without teachers' assistance through Parental Associations (PAs), aiming to secure better provision at school level. Today, PAs function collectively at political level through federations and confederations. Arguably, their goals have extended from catering for poor children, to supporting the school financially (securing secretarial services or equipment for school) and, more importantly, to representing parents in consultation with the state.

Parental involvement in educational issues cannot be examined without highlighting another important dimension: parental education. Arguably, this area has traditionally been far from the state's priorities, sentencing parents to become players of an unfair game. Phtiaka's (1999) analysis informs us that parental education approaches in Cyprus have traditionally followed a passive teacher-

centred didactic model. Thus, parents' experiences, perceptions, knowledge and skills were not adequately valued, giving the experts the power to decide what was to be learnt from parents, who were in turn seen as passive students. Over the years, parental participation in such programmes declined, an indication of parents' dissatisfaction of being lectured. Phtiaka (1999) emphasised the need to turn toward a new parental education model that would include parents and experts-teachers in a more dynamic participatory partnership.

Although local research records promising examples of constructive teacher-parent partnerships as far as parents of non-disabled children are concerned (Symeou, 2006), the case differs significantly when it comes to partnerships between disabled children parents' and the stakeholders involved in the education of their children (Phtiaka, 2001). Unequal power relationships among parents and disability experts act as a barrier for encouraging partnerships on equal terms. However, this is not an exclusive feature of Cyprus. Tomlinson (1982) and Barton (1988) were among the first sociologists to theorise on the issue of unequal power relationships between parents and professionals. Riddell, Brown & Duffield (1994) report that relevant studies conducted in the UK provide evidence to suggest that the ideal of parental partnership is a feature more of rhetoric than reality. Often, the idea of partnership is increasingly used by professionals to justify mechanisms which seek to control the behaviour of parents and their children (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997).

In Cyprus, parents of disabled children have been players in the political game of education ever since it started, although their status has changed over the years. At first, they gratefully accepted anything the state and charitable initiatives would offer – that is, special schools for the education of disabled children (1929 – 1979), the segregating *Special Education Act* (1979) and experts' superiority. After a long period of separatist education, parents came across the idea of integration developed in western countries, and they reluctantly began to advocate for changes in the education system. Alongside all the stakeholders in this process of change, parents witnessed important developments: (i) an influential report suggesting the urgent need to turn toward integration (Constandinides, 1992); (ii) the *Integration of Deaf Children in the Education System Act* (1993) which secured the integration of children with hearing impairments; and (iii) a long consultation process (1995-1998) on subsequent drafts of legislation about integration (Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2002) leading to the long-desired *Integration of Children with Special Needs Act* (1999). Parents' views about the implementation of the new law were recently recorded in an evaluation report prepared for the Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture (see Phtiaka et al., 2005). According to this report, although parents strongly express their dissatisfaction with the way integration is being implemented, at the same time

they are convinced that integration, not segregation, should be the only option for the education of their children. Despite their frustration, parents are still engaged in the process of securing better education for their children and it is expected that they will be present in forthcoming developments.

This paper reports on research findings regarding parental involvement in policy developments in the education of disabled children in Cyprus. The conceptualisation of this study was guided by the assumptions underpinning hermeneutics, a paradigm falling under the umbrella of interpretive approaches. Given the hermeneutical assumption that there are multiple realities and multiple truths, the researcher is engaged in a process of understanding the meaning of what is being researched in order to provide the best possible interpretation (Schwandt, 1997). As the analysis entails interpretation of parental involvement in key-stages of the process, parents' role is contextualised and significant actions and decisions that acted as turning points in parental struggles are pointed out. Qualitative data covering the period 1970-2007 was used for the purposes of this paper. Part of the data was collected for a larger research project about disability and the disability movement in Cyprus (Symeonidou, 2005). Other primary sources were sought to cover the period after the aforementioned research project was completed. The primary sources used in this paper are only a small part of the large archive of newspaper articles about disability issues, which emerged for the research project. The archive comprised thousands of articles from all Cypriot newspapers published in the periodical *Anapirikon Vima* (1970-1974), the newspaper *Phileleftheros* (1974-1989), the newspaper *Simerini* (1990-1998) and all Cypriot newspapers (1999-2007). A justification of the period covered by each source can be found in Symeonidou (2005). Written responses of PAs to consultation documents discussed in Parliament were kindly disclosed by the Cyprus Parliament Archives Department. The Pancyprian Federation of Parents' Associations of Children with Special Needs and the Cyprus Confederation of Disabled People's Organisations kindly provided access to important documents and minutes respectively.

It is particularly important to comment on the terminology used in this paper, given the linguistic variations which shape the way societies regard disability (Corker & French, 1999). Although Cyprus has imported the British term 'children with special needs' which is still unquestionably used, in this paper the term 'disabled children' is used. This decision was taken in the light of critiques regarding the oppressive assumptions hidden in 'special needs' (Corbett, 1996), and the expressed preference of the international disability movement in favour of the term 'disabled people' (Oliver, 1990). In some parts of the paper, language that is now considered outdated or oppressive is used (i.e., mentally retarded children). This is, however, the result of direct translation of texts that originally appear in Greek, indicating local linguistic specificities.

In the sections that follow, four periods associated with parental involvement and important developments are analysed: (i) early forms of parental mobilisation; (ii) parent groups acting as ‘non-pressure’ groups; (iii) parental power through networking; and (iv) resolving issues of identity and power between parent pressure groups.

Early forms of parental mobilisation

In Cyprus, the recorded history of special education dates back to 1929, when the School for the Blind was founded by the wife of the British governor of Cyprus at the time. The period 1929-1979 marked the gradual establishment of special schools (Phtiaka, 2006a). During this period, special schools were run by a Board of Governors, following their own set of rules and regulations, and working in competition with other special schools and institutions (Phtiaka, 2006a). Far from taking on the nature of a movement, parents’ first associations were scattered across Cyprus. They were also special school based, representing parents whose children attended the same special school, but had different types of impairments. PAs were initially interested in fund-raising activities that would help them build special schools or support the existing ones.

Documentary evidence suggests that Nicosia Special School Parents’ Association, formed in 1972, was one of the first PAs in Cyprus (Nicosia Special School Parents’ Association, 1979). At the time, this particular special school did not function in a special school setting. It was spread in different mainstream schools which sheltered its special classes. The appointed headmaster was travelling on a daily basis to supervise the functioning of the ‘school’. Although this could be characterised as an early form of integration, the parents were strongly opposed to this settlement (Nicosia Special School Parents’ Association, 1979) and focussed instead on collecting all the necessary funds for building the long desired special school:

‘The General Board of Nicosia Special School Parents’ Association announces its effort to establish a Special Fund in order to assist the Ministry of Education in its efforts to build an appropriate building for the School, and calls people to make donations.’ (Nicosia Special School Parents’ Association, 1976, p. 3)

In 1977, the Pancyprian Association for Mentally Retarded People was formed in Limassol. It was a voluntary association aiming to inform society about people with learning difficulties and to lobby the state for improvements in educational provision. Primary data indicates that this association was a mixture of parents representing special school associations, non-disabled people representing special

schools' Board of Governors, and special school staff ('Pancyprian association for ...', 1977). The membership of the first General Board of the association denotes that parents were not expected to lead this association. The chair was Lia Tseriotou, a high profile lady, and the vice president was Amerikos Argiriou, a doctor.

The presence of popular personalities and doctors in associations that were supposed to represent parents was a factor against the empowerment of parents. Parents were forced to believe that having a 'mentally retarded' child in the family was a source of stress for parents and catastrophic for non-disabled siblings. Families saw special schools as a convenient setting for disabled children: a setting that would enable parents to feel that their children are somewhere safe and minimise disabled children's interaction with their non-disabled siblings. In his speech, the vice-president of the Pancyprian Association for Mentally Retarded People, Dr Argiriou, emphasised the need for a special institution for 'mentally retarded' children and adults. Bearing the status of a doctor, he presented a series of arguments to suggest that it is impossible for a number of families to live with 'severely retarded' children and he concluded by stating:

'You will see that the least we will achieve with the institutionalised shelter is a place for these children to live. More importantly, we will have achieved to protect their healthy siblings, to have tranquillity in their family and to save our fellow citizens.' (Argiriou, 1978, p. 8)

At this stage, parents accepted this type of statements and when given the opportunity, they expressed themselves in a similar tone (e.g., Theofilou, 1979, 1980).

Only a few months after this association was formed, a letter of protest was published in the newspaper. The author was Nora Afami (1977, p. 8), a mother of a child with learning difficulties:

'Dear Editor,

I address this letter to the archbishop, the bishops, the ministers Mr Mikellides and Mr Sofianos, and the mayor of Limassol Mr Kolakides. A miserable mother of a mentally retarded child appeals to all those people with philanthropic sentiments who can help. It is about the Institution of Mentally Retarded Children of Limassol. Although the piece of land and the money are available, the construction plans are approved and there is a promise that it will be built as soon as possible, there is no progress. I, personally, and all the mothers of those unhappy children beg you to help us build this institution so that our children are saved from the streets where they become a toy of unscrupulous mean people.

Yours sincerely,
Nora K. Afami'

It is important to note that this mother chose to write this letter as an individual, even though there was a newly formed local association that was expected to represent parents. An important feature of this mother's letter is that she addresses her appeal primarily to representatives of the Church (the archbishop and bishops), then to representatives of the state (the ministers) and lastly, to the representative of the local society (the mayor). Elsewhere, I have argued that in the absence of a human rights discourse, the triad 'State-Church-Society' was expected to cater for disabled children and adults (Symeonidou, 2005). This letter indicates that this mother operated within this context, possibly like many other disabled and non-disabled people at the time, including parents of disabled children.

Parent groups acting as 'non-pressure' groups

By late 1978, parents were convinced that segregation was the most appropriate response for disabled children and their families. PAs were constantly struggling to secure the necessary funds to build special schools and hoped for additional financial contributions on behalf of the Ministry of Education. Although there was no relevant policy, a total of eight special schools functioned at the time (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1979). However, as special schools were founded as a result of private initiative and had their own governing bodies and rules, the Ministry of Education and Culture eventually considered that its authority was restricted.

Thus, in October 1978, the Ministers' Council authorised the Ministry of Education to prepare a White Paper on Special Education, submit it to Parliament and 'promote its passing as soon as possible' (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1978). According to the archives kept in Parliament, there were three consultation meetings (in December 1978, March 1979 and April 1979) prior to the passing of the *Special Education Act* in June 1979. In brief, the law passed with minor amendments six months after it was submitted in Parliament. Twist of fate, or twist of politics, the first *Special Education Act* passed during the International Year for the Child. This served as a political tool for the state which advertised the new law in four special education conferences organised throughout 1979 by the National Committee for the International Year for the Child ('Four conferences ...', 1979).

According to the invitation letter sent prior to the first consultation meeting (Cyprus Parliament, 1978), the bodies invited to discuss the White Paper were the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Employment and Social Security, the teachers' union and four PAs:

- Pancyprrian Association for Mentally Retarded People
- Nicosia Special School Parents' Association
- St Loukas Special School Parents' Association
- Vocational School Archbishop Makarios III Parents' Association

Importantly, the Pancyprrian Association for Mentally Retarded People and St Loukas Special School Parents' Association informed Parliament about their interest in being invited to consultation meetings prior to the invitation letter (Pancyprrian Association for Mentally Retarded People, 1978; St Loukas Special School Parents' Association, 1978). The Vocational School Archbishop Makarios III Parents' Association also made a similar query, although its wish to participate in consultation was simply to make sure that the functioning of vocational schools would not be part of the forthcoming law (Vocational School Archbishop Makarios III Parents' Association, 1978). There is no recorded evidence in the Parliamentary Archive about queries from other PAs to participate in the consultation process.

The official report that refers to the consultation meeting held on 21 December 1979 (Cyprus Parliament, 1979b) suggests that PAs were generally satisfied with the White Paper:

'Parents' representatives who participated in the Committee for the discussion of the White Paper expressed their satisfaction for the proposed special legislation that will propose arrangements about issues regarding special educational provision for mentally retarded children. They appeared optimistic about the possibility that the government will soon have under its control all the private special schools. They requested that parents should have the opportunity to participate and be heard in issues regarding the implementation of the proposed legislation.' (p. 3)

Parental satisfaction is also recorded in the minutes kept during this meeting (Cyprus Parliament, 1979a). Parents' suggestions at the time fitted the general philosophy of the White Paper. In summary, parents pointed out the need for:

1. collecting information about children who need special education;
2. special educational provision according to each child's needs;
3. parental representation in the general boards and other committees functioning in special schools;
4. differentiated status between special schools catering for children aged 5-18 and special vocational schools catering for children beyond the age of 18;
5. formation of a training school for special teachers;
6. free medical treatment;

7. formation of a special education department at the Ministry of Education;
8. formation of boarding schools for children with special needs.

In summary, points 1-3 appeared in the White Paper prior to the consultation process. Point 4 also appeared in the White Paper, but it was improved following parents' recommendations, and points 5-8 did not appear in the White Paper and were never added.

Overall, parents appeared easy-going and grateful during the consultation process. No consultation documents were submitted in Parliament indicating detailed suggestions or protests. No relevant articles were recorded in daily newspapers either. Parents were satisfied with the proposed legislation because it would legitimate separatist education that was already taking place and secure their children in separate establishments. As separatist education was what they considered best for their children, they were in complete agreement with the government.

Importantly, in this period, a group of parents co-operated with the Pancyprian Organisation for the Rehabilitation of Disabled People (PORDP), a collective organisation established in 1966 to promote disabled people's interests. It was believed to be an umbrella organisation comprising groups of disabled people with different types of impairments, albeit run by non-disabled distinguished figures of the Greek-Cypriot society. Due to the close relationship between PORDP's non-disabled leader and Petros Stylianou, a government politician, disabled people were benefiting a lot from the activities of the organisation in terms of securing social policy developments (Symeonidou, 2005). Parents joined PORDP in 1978-1979 possibly because they saw it as a means of promoting their goals more easily (PORDP's action, 1978, 1979a). A careful triangulation of primary sources reveals that parents who were the leading figures of PAs in special schools also joined the board of PORDP's parental sub-group (PORDP's action, 1979b).

Not surprisingly, PORDP's philosophy was restricted to the medical and charity models. Thus, it contributed in the construction of stereotypes for disabled people by using oppressive rhetoric and by encouraging fund-raising for building different types of segregating settings, such as institutions and medical centres (Symeonidou, 2005). Consequently, parents continued to promote fundraising for building special schools, but this time through PORDP (PORDP's action, 1979b).

Parents' enrolment in PORDP strengthened their beliefs about separatist education and withheld overcoming their internalised distress:

'The situation is extremely difficult and suffocating for families with a mentally retarded child. Even if the parents are well educated, this unhealthy family structure has a negative influence on the development of the healthy child. The lack of harmony and intellectual balance between the

healthy child and the mentally retarded sibling, prevents the healthy child from feeling happy and without any worries, these being important preconditions for shaping his/her character in the first years of life. The child's relations with his/her peers are influenced and we are aware of many cases where the healthy child becomes miserable and unhappy for the rest of his/her life just because of his/her bad luck to be raised in a family alongside a mentally retarded child. We sadly reach the conclusion that in such families, the rights of the healthy child are violated.' (Theofilou, 1979, p. 3; Theofilou, 1980, p. 116)

Theofilou's way of thinking is representative not only of parents' feelings at the time, but also of society's responses to families with disabled members. Importantly, the same extract was published in a daily newspaper in 1979 and in PORDP's periodical in 1980, indicating the persistence in her way of thinking. Her position becomes even more valuable for this analysis if we consider that Theofilou was the president of the PA of an institution for children with learning difficulties and a founding member of PORDP's parental sub-group. If the activist mother of a disabled child was trapped in this oppressive discourse, it goes without saying that parents who were not yet members of such associations would be even more confused about their role as parents and their children's rights.

Parental power through networking

In 1981, Anthoula Theofilou strongly encouraged all parents of children with learning difficulties to join forces in order to form a powerful pancyprian association. Her vision is recorded in a powerful letter published in a daily newspaper (Theofilou, 1981). Her letter had a repercussion in another association operating in Larnaka and Famagusta, whose chair also sent a letter to the newspaper to express his agreement with Theofilou's arguments (Hatzimichael, 1981). The outcome of Theofilou's efforts was the formation of the Pancyprian Parents' Association of Mentally Retarded People in 1982.

The association established co-operation with the non-disabled leader of PORDP, Petros Stylianou, who became the Honorary President of the former ('Respect to the ...', 1982). Between 1983-1985, Petros Stylianou was a consultant for the President of Cyprus and between 1985-1991 he was an elected Member of Parliament for the second time. His political activity was useful for parents who consistently invited him to their meetings. Their decision to lobby for legislative changes to benefit children with learning difficulties and their families was the outcome of joined meetings held in April 1983 ('Actions and events ...', 1983; 'New actions ...', 1983). By the end of April 1983, the Ministers' Council

examined the parents' demand for legislation for mentally retarded people and agreed to promote it ('Legislation for ...', 1983). In this case, parents succeeded in finding a way to lobby the state through a politician who knew the political language very well.

Furthermore, the Pancyprian Parents' Association of Mentally Retarded People also joined a new collective organisation – the Cyprus Confederation of Organisations of Disabled People (CCODP) formed in 1984, which aimed to substitute the first collective organisation, the PORDP, by accepting only disabled people's organisations as members. Thus, this particular PA became a member after a special arrangement in the CCODP's statutes ('Disabled people ...', 1984). A careful analysis of CCODP's archive (minutes and letters) indicates that CCODP's primary goal was the improvement of the legislative framework for disabled people (Symeonidou, 2005). Primary sources suggest that Anthoula Theofilou, who represented the PA in CCODP, stated that 'the future of mentally retarded people lies in CCODP's actions' (CCODP, 1987, p. 4). CCODP's leader, the lawyer Mikis Florentzos, a leading disabled activist himself, agreed to help her with legislative issues (CCODP, 1987).

The outcome of these fermentations was the passing of the *Mentally Retarded Persons Act* (1989) in 1989. According to the law, a committee should be appointed to safeguard the rights of people with learning difficulties and promote legislative improvements in all areas affecting their lives. The new law also established a fund to assist the committee promote its goals. Increased involvement of the PA in the passing of this law resulted in the legislative arrangement that half of the committee's members should come from their association and the other half should be state officials. This law is a landmark in the association's history. A few years after the passing of the law, a newspaper announcement from the association reminds us that:

'Five years ago, the PANCYPRIAN PARENTS' ASSOCIATION OF MENTALLY RETARDED PEOPLE was actively involved in the passing of a law to legitimise the rights of mentally retarded people. The outcome of that powerful initiative was the 1989 LAW FOR METALLY RETARDED PEOPLE (117/89). As a natural consequence of our struggles, our association was recognized as the only propitious body to decide about half of the members comprising the Committee that evaluates the implementation of the Law.' ('For mentally ...', 1993; capitalisation in the original)

In this case, organised parents found their way in politics and they were successful in securing legislation for a particular group of children. They pursued building networks with influential people and groups, until they achieved what they considered best for their children: a special law for people with learning difficulties.

Parental pressure groups: resolving issues of identity and power

In the 1980s, while parents of children with learning difficulties were involved in powerful politics to improve social provision for their own interest group, the idea of integration reached Cyprus. After a critique of the separatist education system expressed in a UNESCO report (Benevento, 1980), the Ministry of Education and Culture adopted the rhetoric of integration recorded in official documents (Phtiaka, 2006a). Soon, integrative practice began to take place in the absence of relevant legislation. The formation of the Pancyprian Parents' Association of Deaf Children in 1987 determined the massive turn toward integration. Parents of children with hearing impairments expressed their dissatisfaction with the education provided by the School for the Deaf and powerfully lobbied the state to legitimate their children's rights for integration (Kouppanou & Phtiaka, 2006). In 1993, Parliament enacted the *Integration of Deaf Children in the Education System Act* (1993) which legitimised the integration of children with hearing impairments in the mainstream. I shall return to this legislation later in this paper.

In 1991, the Pancyprian Federation of Parents' Associations of Children with Special Needs was formed. This is a collective organisation aiming to represent parents of children with different types of impairments. Eleven associations joined the federation upon its formation. Importantly, the federation's first president was Pavlos Toumazos, who was also the president of the Pancyprian Parents' Association of Deaf Children. Today, there are 25 member-associations of different types (Pancyprian Federation of Parents' Associations of Children with Special Needs, 2007 – see Table 1).

The particularity of the federation's composition lies in the fact that only 6 out of 25 five associations are single-impairment PAs. Twelve associations are special school PAs and four associations are county based PAs. Put simply, the parents' unifying feature was not their child's impairment, but their child's special school or county respectively. Last but not least, three organisations are not PAs, but disability organisations. As I now turn to explain, the federation's position on educational developments that followed is closely related to its synthesis.

Parents' pressure for integration prior to the formation of the federation resulted in the appointment of a committee to investigate the provision of special education and make suggestions for improvements. PAs and the parents' federation expressed their views to the committee which finally produced a report, known as the Constandinides Report (Constandinides, 1992), which suggested the legitimisation of integration. Based on this report, three subsequent draft legislation documents about integration were prepared (1995, 1997 and 1998) and parents were involved in a consultation process held in the Education

TABLE 1: Synthesis of the Pancyprrian Federation of Parents' Associations of Children with Special Needs in 2007

Association Type	Members	Number
Parents' Association of Special Schools, Institutions and Services Centres	Parents whose children attend the same special school, institution or services centre, but they do not necessarily have the same type of impairment	12
Single-Impairment Parents' Associations	Parents whose children have the same type of impairment	6
County Based Parents' Association	Parents whose children attend schools in the same county, but they do not have the same type of impairment	4
Disability Organisations	Disabled and/or non-disabled people	3
Total Number of Associations		25

Parliamentary Committee. This time, parental involvement was more powerful than their involvement in the consultation process of 1978-1979 described earlier. PAs submitted documents with detailed suggestions about the proposed legislation and they participated in numerous parliamentary meetings. The interplay between parents' suggestions and state's reservations regarding the cost of the legislation resulted in amendments and compromise, discussed in more detail elsewhere (Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2002). In what follows, I will focus on the collective parents' views about the last draft legislation of 1998.

The parents' federation expressed its views on the draft legislation of 1998 by submitting an amended copy of the draft legislation with their suggestions in blue and red print. The points in blue were parents' suggestions for additions and the points in red were the points parents wished to be crossed out. This interesting way

of expressing their views was taken into serious consideration during the discussions in Parliament, and the federation expressed its satisfaction for the deputies' commitment (Pancyprian Federation of Parents' Associations of Children with Special Needs, 1998). With this multi-colour copy, which revised specific points of the draft legislation, parents demonstrated their overall agreement with the philosophy of integration proposed in the forthcoming legislation.

A focus on the parents' federation response to the 1998 White Paper, and their additions and deletions in blue and red print, could be summarised as follows:

1. The new law should be part of the general education law.
2. The state should cater for disabled children from birth.
3. Children with learning difficulties, sensory or bodily impairments should attend the mainstream school, except in cases of children with multiple impairments.
4. The state should provide educational services for children who cannot attend the mainstream school due to health problems.
5. The state should develop regulations about the functioning of special schools.
6. The state should issue a 'Code of Practice' to guide services to target children who may have special needs and to support parents.
7. Parents' role in the assessment procedure should be strengthened.
8. Special schools should not be 'neighbouring' mainstream schools: rather, they should be built in the same place with mainstream schools.

Generally speaking, parents' suggestions signify that they were committed to securing the future of special schooling, while at the same time being in favour of integration. Their position is strongly related to the synthesis of the federation analysed earlier. It is evident that special school PAs felt that their children should continue to attend special schools, and that they thus should secure better educational conditions in these settings. In fact, they even specified the categories of children that should attend the mainstream and the special schools (point 3).

The federation's position about one particular issue demonstrates that parents had a long way to go until member-associations resolved issues of identity and power. According to the 1998 White Paper, all existing legislation relevant to the education of disabled children would be abolished after the passing of the new law. Even though the parents' federation agreed with the abolition of the first segregating law of 1979, it was against the abolition of the 1993 legislation about the integration of children with hearing impairments (*Integration of Deaf Children in the Education System Act*, 1993). Why did parents oppose the abolition of the

1993 law when the proposed legislation would still cater for children with hearing impairments? Why should children with hearing impairments continue to have their own law?

The answers in these questions are partly found in the philosophy underpinning the views of the Pancyprrian Parents' Association of Deaf Children, and partly in the cultural assumption that whatever is gained at political level should never be abolished. Parents of children with hearing impairments had been long struggling for the passing of the 1993 law, which was considered as the most successful outcome of their organisation. They were confident that the education provided in the School for the Deaf, the only special school for children with hearing impairments, was inappropriate. This was also emphasised in an influential evaluation report about the quality of education of children with hearing impairments (Markides, 1990), which suggested that all types of education for children with hearing impairments were problematic (i.e., School for the Deaf, special unit, mainstream class). According to Kouppanou & Phtiaka (2006), parents were so determined to secure integration for their children that they marginalised deaf education experts because they considered them responsible for the poor education provided by the School for the Deaf. They also marginalised the views of the organisation of adults with hearing impairments (Kouppanou & Phtiaka, 2006). Thus, it was extremely difficult for parents to let go of this law, even though its implementation was problematic, as it was never followed by regulations. Their commitment in safeguarding the 1993 law is expressed in the following letter which they sent at that time to Parliament:

'The Pancyprrian Association of Parents of Deaf Children works with all member-associations of the Pancyprrian Federation of Parents' Associations of Children with Special Needs for shaping shared positions about the White Paper that will be presented to you as soon as possible [...] We want to strongly emphasise that the Pancyprrian Association of Parents of Deaf Children will **never** accept the abolition of 61(I)1993 Law which safeguards the unconditional integration of deaf children in the main body of education without bureaucratic processes [...] **Parents of deaf children will never accept their children attending special schools without their will.**' (Pancyprrian Association of Parents of Deaf Children, 1998; emphasis in the original)

Evidently, parents of children with hearing impairments were worried that the new legislation would leave their children exposed to a bureaucratic system that could lead to placement in a special school without taking parents' opinion into account. Despite their initial insistence on this, parents finally agreed to the abolition of this law.

The amended copy of the draft legislation submitted by the parents' federation was prepared only seven years after the federation was formed, justifying the nature of its suggestions. From 1991, when the federation was formed, to 1998, when the federation submitted the final document with parents' suggestions on the draft legislation, the federation's member-associations gradually increased from 11 to 21. In this period, the consultation on the white papers proposing integration was the first and most significant mission of the federation. Member-associations, although having only a short experience as part of a federation, hardly struggled to find a balance between what is best for the group of children they primarily represented and what is best for children with different types of impairments that they were expected to represent as members of the federation. The fact that the vast majority of its member-associations were not single-impairment PAs was crucial, as parents did not have to struggle over the different needs of each impairment group to the extent the disability movement had to do (Symeonidou, 2005). Most PAs were representing children with different types of impairments who shared the same special school.

The passing of the 1999 law marked the political transition to integration, giving a sense of satisfaction to organised parents. Its official implementation in 2001 began with gradual accommodations to improve integrative practice. As it is often the case, a gap between policy and practice was unavoidable. A recent evaluation report funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Phtiaka et al., 2005) informs us about the difficulties encountered to implement integration by the different stakeholders (i.e., ministry officials, teachers and parents). As far as parents are concerned, Phtiaka et al. (2005) report that integration is implemented in a way that exhausts them physically and mentally without achieving the promised goals. Mainstream schools were not restructured in a way to encourage integration and, more importantly, teachers did not receive adequate training regarding their new role. Phtiaka (2006b) reports that parents feel alone, intimidated and powerless, and they have limited means of expressing themselves or affecting change. Despite the difficulties they face, parents insist on integration and they demand improvement of integrative practice.

Discussion

In summary, parents' role in influencing educational developments has followed a trajectory that denotes their unchanged desire to improve educational provision and a changing philosophy about what is best for their children's education. This trajectory was influenced primarily by their effort to conceptualise the particularities of their role as parents of a disabled child in the given society

and an on-going struggle to find their way in politics as organised parents. Their involvement in consultation with the state was long guided by the medical and the charity models characterising the local culture. Initially, they sought support from high profile people, doctors, the Church and state officials. They also co-operated with charity organisations run mainly by non-disabled people campaigning for disabled people's interests. Parents were carried away by a language of disability oppression which hindered political changes and led to the reproduction of social and cultural stereotypes toward disabled people. Over the years, parents began to make a turn toward the social model of disability without putting the medical model aside, as they maintained that segregated educational provision can be more beneficial for their children.

I would argue that together with the historical, political and social particularities of Cyprus (see also Symeonidou, 2002), there are concurrent factors that withheld parents' powerful lobbying of the state. To begin with, the absence of a representative number of single-impairment PAs led to limited opportunities for distinct parental group members to interact, share experiences, exchange views and co-operate for their children's best interests. This prevented them for shaping a group identity, a necessary prerequisite for powerful political engagement of a group (Hofstede, 2001). The plethora of special school PAs and county based PAs sentenced parents to reproduce the medical and the charity models characterising both the local culture and the nature of education provided by special schools. Although further research needs to be undertaken with regard to the synthesis of the three types of PAs (i.e., single-impairment, special school based and county based), it is important to keep in mind that parents' class differences are related with different types of impairment associations. Arguably, middle class parents of children with some kind of physical impairment or specific learning difficulties are more powerful (Riddell, Brown & Duffield, 1994). Indeed, in the case of Cyprus, the membership of single-impairment PAs comprises middle class and articulate parents who have occasionally managed to influence legislative developments for their own interest group.

Given the limited number of single-impairment PAs, interaction with equivalent single-impairment organisations of disabled people was restricted. Since most parents were not operating through single-impairment PAs, why would they even consider initiating co-operation with disabled people's single-impairment organisations? Such an interaction perhaps would enable parents to become better informed about the particularities of the education of their children, and the transition to adulthood and the labour market. For example, if constructive dialogue was initiated between parents of children with hearing impairments and the equivalent adults' organisation, parents' lobbying for change perhaps would have been different and more beneficial for their children. Although

disabled people's organisations in Cyprus have still a long way to go until they also engage in powerful disability politics, they have made important progress in criticising oppressive policy from a human rights perspective (Symeonidou, 2005). Possible co-operation with PAs would benefit both groups, particularly in thinking about the transition to a discourse that respects linguistic and cultural specificities, and is not oppressive to disabled people –namely, a 'new disability discourse' (Corker, 1999). Last but not least, I need to address the absence of self-advocacy groups of adults with learning difficulties. People with learning difficulties are considered passive persons with limited ability to participate in decision-making about their lives. This belief gives parents an increased sense of responsibility and authority over their children's lives and leaves the issue of empowering people with learning difficulties untouched.

The absence of single-impairment PAs in Cyprus prevented parents from shaping a group identity that would strengthen their involvement in their collective federation and facilitate the shaping of a collective identity. To be more specific, parents did not undergo all the necessary steps to form a collective identity that would enable them to function as a collective movement (Crossley, 2002). Unlike the disability movement (see Symeonidou, 2005), parents did not struggle to resolve basic issues such as collective ways of protest, ways of lobbying the state, and ways of safeguarding the rights of all disabled children without undermining the particularities of different impairment groups. The fact that the parents' federation did not support the abolition of the law for the integration of children with hearing impairments, at a time when a new law was emerging to legitimate the integration of all disabled children, is quite informative of the nature of the federation. Last but not least, parents seem to be trapped in a perceived hierarchy of impairments that rests in the local culture, similar to the one characterising the disability movement (Symeonidou, 2005). Parents' sense of impairment hierarchy needs to be researched further, and the connections with parents' social class and their children's type of impairment need to be drawn.

Although everyday life is a continuous struggle for parents of disabled children, they are empowered to influence decision-making and improve their children's quality of life. Even though parents are often seen as a disempowered group that does not speak the language of the politicians or is guided by experts, parents can still find ways to be empowered. Tisdall & Riddell (2006) argue that in the light of existing legislation, parents are now a powerful lobby group of which politicians and civil servants are very aware. In Cyprus too, parents have demonstrated that they can create the prerequisites of becoming politically powerful, and they have also begun to prosecute the state for not securing educational provision as expected according to the law. As parents gradually gain political power and build networks, the question is to which direction they will use it.

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